

An Absorbing Story of Love, Mystery and Adventure

(Continued from Preceding Page.)

mistaking—"If Vetter were to lose his diamonds, wouldn't it, Budy?" The spiral of cigarette smoke again occupied Billy Kane. It was quite true that his mind was already made up; but for the moment he was the Rat, and the Rat would not be likely to accede to her suggestion with any overwhelming degree of complacency. "You are a little inconsistent, aren't you?" he inquired sarcastically. "If you are so anxious to prevent this crime, why don't you warn the police?"

"You can put down my inconsistency to the frailty of my sex again if you like," she answered quickly. "But you know quite well why. And, besides, one Budy Morgan, having more at stake than the police, is more likely to accomplish the task successfully. Yes—Budy?"

"But this isn't my hunt!" he protested with a snarl. "I can't stop all the crimes in the world! This isn't my crowd! I'm not responsible for the Mole. I don't know his plans. How can I put the crimp in them? The game is to let the Mole go ahead, isn't it, and then Red Vallon is to grab the chestnuts out of the Mole's pocket? Well, that's all right! But suppose I butt in, and knowing nothing about the Mole's plans, fall down, and he gets away with the goods, and is too sharp for Red Vallon so that I can't even get the

was ten minutes of eight. He knew where Vetter's was. That point presented no difficulties; he could hardly have spent the months he had amongst the queer, heterogeneous lives of the East Side without knowing at least that much about so outstanding a character as the old Hollander diamond merchant—but that was quite another matter from knowing where the old Hollander domiciled his diamonds! Billy Kane frowned, as he went along. Well, was it necessary to steal the diamonds? That task, on the face of it, was so almost practically impossible as to render it bizarre. He had nothing to work on, no information, just the cool suggestion that he should steal the diamonds first, and, under ordinary

rapping and bringing the old Hollander to the door.

He turned, and retracing his steps, sauntered nonchalantly along, passed by the house again—and slipped into the lane. Circumstances, as he found them, alone could govern his actions.

Billy Kane took stock now of the surroundings. The frame building was an old affair, and the doors therefore would be outrageously creaky. Billy Kane scowled. The prospect of creaky floors and protesting boards was not a pleasant one. And then the scowl vanished, and a smile flickered across his lips. From somewhere at the back of the house there came suddenly the throbbing notes of a violin. The smile broadened. That was

moral cropper, was, if he, Billy Kane, were any judge, little short of a genius.

Glancing sharply about him once more, Billy Kane, with a lithe spring, caught the top of the fence, and drew himself cautiously up until he could peer over. He hung there motionless for a moment. A few yards away from him, in a slightly diagonal direction, and between himself and the back door, was the window of the rear room; and, as he had suspected, the window was open. He could see inside; that is, in a restricted sense. A man, it was Savnak, of course, crouched on his violin, standing, was awaying gently to and fro on his feet to the tempo of the music, his back to the window; and at

gas jet above the table fell upon them; and then, impulsively closing the pocketbook again, he pushed it a little away from him. "They can wait!" he said. "By and by, we will look at them one by one. But they do not feed the soul, my Savnak, like your music. Play some more. They are not worth one of your notes."

"Are they not?" Savnak's voice seemed tinged with bitterness. "The soul may be well fed, Vetter, but that does not keep one often enough from tightening the belt! I think I would be fortunate to make the exchange—my gift, such as it is, for your diamonds."

"You do not mean that you say!" the old Hollander replied, shaking his head reprovingly. "I

pitched, screaming note. Then silence. Billy Kane raised himself on tiptoes. He could just see in through the window; no more. It seemed like some picture flashed on a cinema screen, quick, instantaneous. A third man, hat drawn far over his face, was standing by the table, covering Vetter and Savnak with a revolver. The man snatched up the champagne pocketbook, reached above his head, turned out the gas—and the room and window were in blackness.

It had happened with the suddenness and swiftness of a lightning flash, so quick that the brain stumbled a little in a dazed way in an effort to grasp its significance. And then Billy Kane wrenched his automatic from his pocket. The thief

dropped to the lane, and, instead of running now, made his way slowly and cautiously forward, hunched close against the wall. If he ran out of the lane into the arms of Vetter and Savnak, besides hampering the pursuit by distracting their attention from the fugitive, he invited the decidedly awkward and very natural suspicion of being connected with the thief himself; and the police would be very put to listen with their tongues in their cheeks to any explanation that the Rat might offer to account for his presence in the lane at that particular moment! And if there was any one thing that he wished to avoid to-night it was a complication with the police that would inevitably interfere with his freedom of action during the next few hours.

Came a wild cry now from both Vetter and Savnak from the front of the house; and then the two men, yelling at the top of their voices, both hatless, Savnak, apparently unconscious in his excitement that he was brandishing his violin frantically in one hand and his bow in the other, tore madly

loot away from Red—am I responsible?"

"I'm not unreasonable," she said—and smiled. "There is a good deal of truth in what you say. But there is a way to provide against both contingencies."

The snarl was still in his voice. "What is it?" he demanded. "Steal the diamonds yourself before the Mole gets to work," she proposed calmly.

Billy Kane's gasp was wholly genuine.

"What?" he ejaculated. "You've plenty of time," she said sweetly. "Vetter's isn't far from here, and it's not much more than half past seven now. The diamonds can be returned to Vetter tomorrow. After having had them stolen once, I think Vetter could be trusted to put them somewhere where neither the Mole nor anyone else would be likely to succeed a second time."

"But I don't know where the diamonds are now!" His voice was helpless in spite of himself.

She lifted her shoulders.

"Neither do I," she said imperturbably.

"Well, you've got your nerve!" he burst out—and it was Billy Kane, not the Rat, who spoke.

The interview, as far as she was concerned, was evidently at an end. She had resumed her frugal meal, and was picking daintily at the sandwich on her plate. Her eyebrows arched.

"I hope you've got yours," she murmured.

He stood up. He could have laughed ironically, and likewise he could have sworn. She was distractingly pretty, as she sat there quite the mistress of herself; but her profound and utter disregard as to how the perilous project might result for him personally, brought suddenly a vicious sweep of anger upon him—and abruptly, without a word, he swung from the table, and made his way toward the door. But the few steps cleared his brain a little, brought things into sharper focus. After all, he had forgotten! To her, he was the Rat. And the Rat—he did not question it—merited little of either mercy or consideration at her hands. At the door he looked back. She nodded to him pleasantly, and smiled—not in the manner of one who might very well be sending another to his death!

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Billy Kane, and, opening the door, stepped out to the street.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Robbery.

It was not far to Vetter's place, but—Billy Kane looked at his watch under a street lamp—it was later than she had said. It

circumstances, he might well be filled with dismay at the prospect of failure in view of the threat which she held over his head, though that side of it need not, and did not, concern him to-night. In a few hours from now he no longer expected to be the Rat, in a few hours Peters would have had his choice between losing his life and telling the truth, and under those conditions there was very little room for doubt but that Peters would have told the truth if, however, he could meanwhile save the old Hollander from loss, he, Billy Kane, was quite ready to go to almost any length to do so.

He went on at a quick pace, traversing block after block. He smiled ironically to himself, as he finally turned a corner, and with more caution now, approached a low frame building that was bordered by a dark and narrow lane. Yes, it was bizarre enough! He could not very well inform the police himself! The Rat—and particularly Billy Kane—was not at the moment on speaking terms with the police! But was it necessary to steal the diamonds?

Her idea, of course, was that then they would be absolutely safe from any attempt, or, perhaps, what she feared most, physical coercion on the part of the Mole—even if Vetter were given a warning.

But surely Vetter could take care of himself if he were warned! He, Billy Kane, certainly preferred that method! But, even that, as an alternative, was not quite so simple as it appeared. He was still the Rat. He did not know the plan this so-called Mole had evolved, and, more vital still, he did not know how closely Red Vallon was, in turn, watching the Mole. It was eight o'clock now, and any or all of them might already be here. If he, Billy Kane, were discovered there would never be that little interview with Peters! The corollary was self-evident. Even for the purpose of warning the man, to reach Vetter inside this house here, that he was just passing, demanded the same degree of caution and secrecy on his part as though he entered for purpose of stealing the stones himself. Also the little shop that made the front of the building was closed and dark. Vetter's living quarters, he had heard, which was one of the eccentricities that had made the man a talker of character on the East Side, consisted of no more than a single room, serving for every purpose, at the rear of the shop itself. He did not dare take the risk of inviting attention by

Savnak, doubtless, and, for the moment at least, it was the violin, rather than pinocchio, that was engaging the two men. Personally, under the circumstances, he, Billy Kane, was very much in favor of the violin. The violin would help a good deal—it became a question of creaky floors.

He moved silently forward now rather into the lane, keeping close to the wall in the darker shadows of the house. The old Hollander and his crony were obviously in the back room. He glanced sharply up and down the length of the building. He could see nothing. It was intensely dark. The wall of the house was blank. There were no windows opening on the lane.

An expression, grimly quizzical, settled on his face. It was a queer setting for a robbery, this untentious, even tumble-down, little shop, with its back-room living quarters! But the unpretentiousness of the old Hollander's surroundings in no way argued poverty! He had known of Vetter by reputation, quite apart even from any connection with the East Side. The man had a clientele among the best in the city. He was an authority on diamonds. He dealt only in the choicest stones, and he was absolutely reliable and honest. The world of fashion had made a path to Vetter's door, not he to theirs. In this ten thousand-dollar consignment, for instance, there would probably not be more than fifty or sixty stones, not enough to make a small handful, but not one of them, probably, would be worth less than a hundred dollars, and most of them would be worth a great deal more.

Billy Kane reached the end of the building and found that a board fence, some seven or eight feet high, continued on down the lane obviously enclosing the back yard of the place. The violin throbbed on. The notes came clear and sweet, entirely unsmothered now, as though from an open window. He stood there for a moment listening. The playing was exquisite. It was some plaintive, haunting melody given life by a master touch. He remembered White Jack's description of the expatriated musician. Without question Savnak could "fiddle"; the man, in spite of having come a

She Studied the Cipher for an Instant Calmly. She Appeared to Be Neither Agitated Nor Confused. She Raised Her Eyes to Billy Kane's, a Glimpse Half of Mockery, Half of Menace, in Their Brown Depths.

the table, side face to the window, but with his back toward Billy Kane, Vetter, the old Hollander, white-haired, sat rapt in attention, staring at the violinist.

Billy Kane drew himself further up and straddled the fence. The position of the two men rendered him safe from observation. The notes of the violin, in a tremolo, died softly away. The old Hollander dug his knuckles across his eyes; and his words, spoken in perfect English, evidently the language common to the two men of diverse nationalities, reached Billy Kane distinctly.

"You are wonderful, my old friend Savnak. It is divine. My friend, you are wonderful." The violinist shrugged his shoulders.

"Once," he said, "I could really play. Yes, I tell you, you who will believe me, that I could sway them, people that I could do with them as I would, that I— He stopped abruptly, and shrugged his shoulders again. "But what is the use of memories? Memories! They are bad! They have a bad taste! Let us forget them! You were to show me the great purchase that arrived today."

"These!" The old Hollander took from his pocket what looked like a soft, pliable, champagne skin pouch, which he opened and laid on the table, disclosing a cluster of gems that, nesting on a snowy bed of wadding, sparkled and scintillated as the rays of the

"know better! But I do not like to hear you talk like that. Things are not so bad with you now. You are moody. Play some more, my friend."

"You will!" Again Savnak shrugged his shoulders. He nestled his chin on the violin. "It will be something ray, then, and lively—eh, Vetter!—to chase the blue devils away."

The notes of the violin rose again. Billy Kane began to lower himself from the fence into the backyard. His mind was made up now. Since there were two of them there, a warning surely was all that was necessary. The window was not much more than shoulder high from the ground, and he had, then, only to cross the yard and call to Vetter through the window. His appearance there would no doubt startle and alarm the old Hollander half out of his wits, but that was exactly what would cause the man to guard his diamonds all the more zealously for the rest of the night. Once warned, the two men in there between them ought certainly to be able to take care of themselves and that champagne pocketbook.

Billy Kane dropped softly to the ground, straightened up, took a step forward—and stopped as though rooted to the spot. There had come a cry from Vetter. The violin broke off with a jerky, high-

when or in whatever way he had got into the house, must necessarily make his escape either by the front door or by the back door and through the yard here. If it were the latter, which seemed the more likely, he, Billy Kane, had the man at his mercy; if it were the former, the man would probably reach the street, in any case, before he, Billy Kane, could get over the fence and rush down the lane.

Billy Kane was moving swiftly in the direction of the back door. He had to choose one way or the other. He could not attempt to guard both exits at the same time! If the man—

Vetter's voice rose in a furious cry from the room:

"It is by the front, Savnak, he has gone! Quick! I hear him going out! Quick! The street!"

"Yes! Quick! The street!" Savnak, like a parrot, in a shrill, hysterical voice, was echoing the other's words. "Quick! Chase him! And about for the police! A chair! Tell over. The two men were evidently floundering their way to the door. "Curse him for turning out the light!"

Billy Kane whirled and dashed for the fence. As he straddled the ground, straightened up, took a step forward—and stopped as though rooted to the spot. There had come a cry from Vetter. The violin broke off with a jerky, high-

down the street in pursuit of their quarry.

Billy Kane slipped out to the street. Doors of tenements and houses were beginning to open; heads were beginning to be thrust out through windows; the street was beginning to assume a state of pandemonium. A block down, the quarry, well in the lead of the old Hollander and the violinist, leaped suddenly into a waiting automobile and vanished around the corner.

Billy Kane turned away. He felt a curiously chagrined resentment against this so-called Mole, that was quite apart from his angry resentment of the fact that the old Hollander had been victimized. He had expected something quite different from the Mole! Red Vallon—and she, too—had given the Mole a reputation for cleverness, craft and cunning; but, instead of having shown any cleverness, or even a shred of originality, the Mole, or his minion, had perpetrated nothing more than a bald, crude theft that any housebreaker or broken-down old "lag" could have pulled off with equal lack of finesse! Well, anyway, for the moment so far as he was concerned, the affair was at an end, and he could only await developments. If all hinged on Red Vallon now—on Red Vallon, who proposed in turn to rob the robber—or Red Vallon, who, later on, would keep an appointment with him, Billy Kane, in the Rat's den!

As he turned a corner, Billy Kane consulted his watch. It was still early, just a trifle after eight—too early for that interview with Peters yet. He might as well go back to Two-Finger Tasker's then. It was scarcely likely that she was still there, but, if she were, so much the better! She could hardly hold him responsible for failure; and, in any case, she would realize that there was still the chance of recovering the stones by, in turn again, outwitting Red Vallon, if the gangster had been successful. If she were not there, Two-Finger Tasker's was as good a place as any in which to put in the time.

(To Be Continued)